

Queer Space / Queer Habits

We are proposing a series of events to take place in New York from April-June, 1994, to explore the conjunctions of space and sexuality in the urban environment. The 1994 date is significant for marking the 25th anniversary of Stonewall: the series of events in urban space (a raid on a New York gay bar; riots; a subsequent history of marches, parades, and politics) that is now taken as the inaugural moment of an international gay and lesbian liberation movement. We intend, however, to view Stonewall in the context of both earlier and later uses of urban space, as well: "Queer Space/Queer Habits" will consider New York as a historical palimpsest of arrivals and departures, in a succession of diasporas each of which included at least some gay/lesbian component; and it will also focus particular attention on more recent developments, beginning with the AIDS crisis, from which a non-separatist, and at the same time non-assimilationist urban queer critique has been emerging.

Project summary

The components of the "Queer Space" project will include a two-day symposium/performance event; a scholarly publication and a popular publication; commissioned public art; a gallery installation utilizing video; commissioned electronic art (a video map/game); bus or boat tours of the city; and a forum/installation based on a current housing controversy.

Rationale

The politics of space--encompassing the operations of power both in space and through the production and maintenance of spatial arrangements--have been addressed over the last two decades in three different intellectual areas. In the aesthetic realm, since the late 1960s, artists and critics have investigated the relational or social, rather than absolute, character of aesthetic meaning, an investigation that changed the very form of the art object. In diverse ways, artists intervened in the apparent autonomy of an artwork's meaning by calling attention to the relationships among the work, the viewer, the exhibition space and the historical circumstances of their interaction. Contextual art practices, falling under the rubrics of "site-specificity," "institutional critique," and "critiques of representation," are spatial practices; they question the rigidity of conventional distinctions between the "inside" and "outside" of artworks and institutions, revealing the social relations concealed by such distinctions.

To a considerable extent, this "social production of art" perspective has been paralleled by the unfolding of a "production of space" analysis in the field of urban

studies. Against the prevailing idea that the form of a city of building is determined by natural processes, urban scholars have theorized the indissoluble connection between urban spatial organization and the relations structuring particular societies.

The third examination of spatial politics has taken place in feminist cultural theory where critics have developed a sophisticated and highly influential analysis of the gendered space of visual representation. This body of work analyzes the social relations of looking that simultaneously produce representations and subjects for those representations.

Feminist ideas about representation have made an enormous impact on contextual art practice. Likewise, many architects and public artists working in urban contexts, have turned to the insights of critical urban studies in order to criticize the social conditions of contemporary urban sites. But urban studies--and much of the art and architectural practices influenced by urban studies--frequently exclude issues of gender and sexuality, even rejecting feminist work as falling outside the space of "real" spatial politics.

It is in this context that we propose to move beyond the feminist conceptual frame of gender into one that more specifically focuses on the spaces and practices that constitute sexualities and sexual identities: what we are calling "queer space." The word "queer" itself means across--it comes from the Indo-European root -twerkw, which also yields the German quer (transverse), Latin torquere (to twist), English athwart. We use the label "queer" for this investigation, rather than offering a list of nominally distinct identities (gay, lesbian, bisexual, heterosexual, transsexual, celibate, etc.), because rather than presuming the coherence and distinctness of each of these, we will attend to the transverse space of their production and performance; to the ways in which they are implicated with each other; to their relations with such other identity-implicating issues as race and class; and to the many practices that involve crossing between and among them.

"Space" is, of course, a huge and inclusive term, itself requiring specification. Since this project will consider space in relation to both temporal practices and the formation of historical identities, we propose to articulate the concept of space in terms of the spatialized layers of meaning that attach to the term "habit." "Habit" suggests ways of mediating back and forth between active and passive; between space and time; between the most intimate and the most public space; and also among the realms of static objects and places, movements, and behavior. (Note that "behavior" comes from the same root as "habit.")

At the most intimate level, habit represents (1) *an individual's "characteristic bodily or physical condition"* (Random House Dictionary); her or his bodily habitus, individual carriage, musculature, movement.

Including some of the most distinctive ways that queer people interact with ourselves and our environments. The machine-toned gym body, male and female, for one example; the cyborg system formed by the individual body

and its machine, in the public/narcissistic space of the gym.
... Or the various kinds of habitus involved in the
complex semiotics of effeminacy. "Teddy bears" and "fats
and fems." Androgyny (or rather androgynies). Etc., etc.,
etc.

Moving outward from that, habit represents (2) *clothing: the "garb of a particular rank, profession, religious order, etc."*

A lot of distinctive queer knowledge about space has to do with the relation between these first two levels of "habit": the relation of bodies and clothes. That knowledge includes the following: Clothes are not the inevitable expression of a "natural" body underneath. They accrue meaning and presence when they are at cross-purposes with important features of the body. Clothes are referential: they refer to other clothes, to other historical periods and international sites, to the economics of their production and consumption, to gender and sexual vernaculars. At the same time, clothes form and inflect the shape, motion, and self-perception of bodies (as in "body drag"). Clothes are also connected with the culture of the (denaturalized) "chosen" body (the gym body, the smooth body, the "fit" body). Clothes are a potent way of sculpting social space and can therefore be a form of activism.

Then, as well, habit is (3) *one's "customary practice or compulsive need, inclination, or use."*

Habit in this sense represents the repeated gestures or acts by which we and our environment inhabit each other and are impressed on each other, through such routes as substance ingestion and refusal, movement through space (strolling, dancing), "work habits," sexual habits, rituals of interaction and avoidance, consumer habits, etc. In the intersection among meanings (1), (2), and (3) would reside the topic one might call (borrowing from the writing of Cindy Patton) queer kinesthetics: forms of movement and kinesthetic proprioception as a function of queer identities and cultures. What does it mean, how does it occupy time and space, to "feel" or "act" butch? or queeny? or cruisy? clone-y? To vogue, get arrested (in a protest; in an entrapment), snap!, have attitude, play pool, march in a parade (St. Patrick's? Pride?), stand with the spectators?

How do different kinds of dancing work? What does it mean to a well body to walk into a hospital? To a sick body? The body experienced as endangered: from inside, from outside. Kinesthetics of memory; of loss; of rage. Dignity, indignity, and movement in the self-experienced body.

Whence, habit is (4) *"a dominant or regular disposition or tendency; prevailing character or quality."*

Orientations; identities. No matter whether you think of them as inborn or constructed, they are steeped in a near-infinity of histories and interactions, along the same continuum from habitus to habitat.

Then, habit is (5) *habitation, "a place of residence; dwelling; abode."*

Our home (when we have one); what we make of it; what it makes of us. Real estate, decor, and more broadly, our construction and self-construction in terms of property-owning or -renting, nomadism, consumer choices. That the (very American) construction of identity in relation to ownership and consumption needn't by any means be a passive, acquiescent, or normalizing process is one of the lessons of New York-centered queer culture. It has offered an influential prototype for contemporary strategies of creative, sometimes subversive consumption in and of space. Pastiche, radical recontextualization, and the literal and metaphoric recycling of sites, buildings, objects, styles, cultural icons, and fragments of material vernaculars are among the ways that queer people most influentially create new value: value economic, aesthetic, intellectual, emotional, and political. At the same time, such processes are part of the larger economic and social ecology of urban life in which queer needs, people, communities are involved on both sides of conflicts around displacement, exclusion, and the quiet forms of violence that go with gentrification.

And finally, habit is (6) *habitat, "the kind of place that is natural for the life and growth of an animal or plant."*

Our environment as a whole, including the environment of

cyberspace, media and fantasy; and its ambivalent relation to our "life and growth." What is it to be "an habitue" of a place? Media-space and glamour; media-space and violence; the space of the nation (that "imagined community") and its relation to apparently local issues of dignity, rights, habitation, pleasure, and violence.

The concept of "habit" will function in this project as an image for the transmission of imprints of meaning back and forth among the levels of body, clothing, behavior, movement, character, buildings, streets, and environs. It will help us make vivid the distinctive junctures that have emerged from, and in turn shaped, gay/lesbian and queer cultures: and to envision how habitat, habitation, character, usage, clothing, bodies, nomadism, ownership, and fantasy might be brought into different, more transformative and revelatory relation to one another.

Project Design

The elements of "Queer Space/Queer Habits" are designed to illuminate the interrelations among these levels in the context of the queer cultures of New York. Components of the project will include:

1) A two-day colloquium, including both academic and performance elements, to introduce and explore the topic of the project. At least one day will be specifically oriented around the rubric "queer kinesthetics." Formats including a "fashion show," a television "talk show," and a disco will be interspersed with more conventional formats. Invited speakers/performers will include at least some of the following:

Neil Bartlett, playwright, historian, and novelist
Don Belton (Macalester College), novelist and performance artist
Rafael Campo, physician/poet
Gary Fisher (University of California, Berkeley), fiction writer
Susan Foster (University of California, Riverside), dance historian
Diana Fuss (Princeton University), gender theorist
Philip Brian Harper (Harvard University), cultural critic
Isaac Julian, filmmaker
Tom Kalin, filmmaker
John Kelly, performance artist
Wayne Koestenbaum (Yale University), author of The Queen's Throat
Simon Lung, artist
Michael Moon (Duke University), cultural critic
Mitchell Morris (University of California, San Diego), musicologist
Jose Munoz (Duke University), film theorist
Todd Palmer (Columbia University), architect
Cindy Patton (Temple University), author of Inventing AIDS

Kendall Thomas (Columbia University Law School), legal theorist
Sasha Torres (Brown University), television theorist
Simon Watney, author of Policing Desire
Sandy White (University of Texas), cultural critic
George Wolfe (Joseph Papp Theater), theatrical producer

- 2) A gallery installation at The Storefront (by architect Elizabeth Diller) that both builds and comments on the events of the colloquium--in particular, on the relation between "queer kinesthetics" as discussed/performed in the colloquium, and larger issues of inhabited architectural space.
- 3) At least one piece of commissioned public art, that will dramatize and reshape its urban setting. [billboards? bus posters--wending through the 5 boroughs? Krzysztof Wodiczko [sp?] lighting installation? Barney's windows, perhaps including live models, video cameras shooting in and out?]
- 4) A free, widely distributed tabloid- or booklet-format publication (possibly edited by Dennis Dollens), perhaps like a bar paper or a zine, that will feature a schedule of "Queer Space" events; maps of/to the events; a guide (including creative map-work?) to other, relevant queer events and sites throughout the boroughs; perhaps listings for other events related to the Stonewall anniversary and the Gay Games; perhaps personals ads; perhaps some manifestos of various sorts for the project as a whole.
- 5) An event and/or installation concerning the dynamics and economics of queer occupation of urban space, with a particular focus on the controversy about the proposed Housing Works AIDS drop-in center in SoHo.
- 6) One or more mobile events, using and subverting a conventional "tourist" format (bus tour, Circle Line cruise, walking tour) to explore queer uses of New York space, perhaps as they intersect with tourist uses; with memorial sites; with sexual sites; with anti-gay and -lesbian violence; with various forms of queer migration and immigration.
- 7) A commissioned video/electronic game based on the queer and homophobic geographies of the city, possibly involving the issue of bashing.
- 8) Finally, an edited volume based on the above, perhaps concentrating on the colloquium but including as much material as possible from the other events. Likely publishers for such a volume would include the Princeton Architectural Press (which published Sexuality and Space) or Duke University Press (which is inaugurating a new series, Series Q, in queer cultural studies).